

# Laurence M. Huey

## Field Notes

October 8, 1960 to October 20, 1960



October Notes from Willow Beach,

Colorado River, Arizona

Laurence M. Huey

From October 8 to October 20, 1960, the writer camped at Willow Beach on the Arizona side of the Colorado River. This locality is in the Lake Meade Recreational Area, about 10 to 12 miles downstream from Hoover Dam, and is maintained by the U. S. National Park Service.

The river in this area is narrow and flows with a fairly rapid current, through a steep, precipitously walled canyon; the walls rising perpendicularly from the water in several places.

The flora of the surrounding countryside is sparse, the predominant species being stunted encelia and creosote bushes which dot the mountain sides where enough soil is present to sustain them. At the mouths of a few sharply breaking canyons, where little beach-like banks of alluvial soil borders the river, small thickets of mesquite, arrowweed and tamarisk are growing.

The site where most of these observations were made was from a camping space in the mouth of a canyon one-half mile south of Willow Beach, where the Park Service had graded, hard-surfaced, and landscaped the area for visitors. A winding, serpentine-like hedge of oleanders has been planted to protect the campsites and was about three feet tall at the time of my visit. This hedge and several large mesquites that had not been removed when the canyon was graded, were the only green plants growing on the canyon floor. The south wall of this campsite canyon rose sharply to a summit, a hundred feet or more above the canyon floor, and casts a welcome shadow in the afternoon. A few stunted encelia and creosote bushes growing on the steep slope were havens for several species of birds while the rock and soil





debris was the homes of four species of mammals, Desert Chipmunks Ammospermophilus harrisi; Whitefooted Deer Mice Peromyscus; Merriam Kangaroo Rats Dipodomys merriami, and Rock Pocket Mice Perognathus intermedius. The population of the latter two species was fairly swarming, yet there was but little natural food on the slope to support them, nor was there any natural food to be found on the paved canyon floor below. Almost the entire sustenance was artificial and depended on the scraps thrown out by the campers, a veritable wild life feeding station.

The cold water of the nearby river is kept well stocked with rainbow trout with an all-year open fishing season. The purpose of the campsite is for the convenience of the fishermen who usually keep most of the campsites occupied. These fishermen, in preparing a popular fish bait called "dough-ball", cut away the crust from loaves of white flour bread, rekneading the soft inner part into a tough dough, which when placed on fish hooks does not readily dissolve in water. The unused bread crusts are usually tossed out for the birds and desert chipmunks, who are ever alert and eagerly watching from hillside vantage points for any "handout" that might be forthcoming from the camps along the length of the campground.

The most vigilant birds were 30 or 40 House Sparrows that seemed to forrage in a tight flock, and whose watchful eyes were quick to observe the opening of a trailer door or a person beyond his camp in the act of throwing out food. Their rush was always the signal for a hundred-fifty or more Desert Quail, who also ranged along the steep hillside, out of harms way, to start running or flying if they were late or far away, for their share. The Desert Chipmunks too were quick to follow the sparrows and quail for as much of the loot as they could carry away to their homes on the rocky hillside or bury beneath the bushes. Seldom did a contribution pass unobserved, nor was



any sizable part left when the rush was over. However, in the scramble much of the food was broken into tiny morsels which, when the hillside shadow fell or darkness came, was set upon by the nocturnal mammals. The pocket rats and pocket mice swarmed over the campground while the white-footed mice invaded the fishermen's trailers if opportunity permitted. A rapacious roadrunner continually skulked behind the shrubs on the hillside ever alert for a chance to dash from its hiding spot and seize any bird or mammal it was able to capture, added considerable interest to the observer.

The relations of these birds and the chipmunks one with another, their bizarre feeding habit and the attraction they had in bringing other passing birds to the canyon for food form the outstanding subject of these notes. The observations of single birds and a few migrants on the river contributes in a small measure to the fall bird records for Northwestern Arizona.

The capricious mood of October weather was without doubt a contributing factor also in the presence of a few of the different birds seen in this barren locality. On October 7th, the day before I arrived, the temperature at noon had been 105 degrees, but a drizzling rain commenced falling on the afternoon of the 9th and continued all night. This reduced the temperature considerably and no further uncomfortable warmth occurred. The weather report stated that snow had fallen to the eastward in the Grand Canyon and Flagstaff areas prior to this rainy night. On October 14th, a strong northerly wind came up and continued for the two following days. Several different birds were seen following these weather disturbances.





*Podilymbus podiceps*: Pied-billed Grebe.

A single individual was first seen October 12, swimming in the river near the shore at the canyon-mouth boat landing. Probably the same bird was noted fishing at the same place several times later during my stay.

*Phalacrocorax auritus*: Double-crested Cormorant.

A flock of nineteen shags was seen October 10 at the Black Canyon dam site, about two miles up river from Willow Beach. They were roosting on a large cable that had been stretched from the perpendicular cliffs on either side, a hundred feet above the river's surface. Cormorants in single or multiple numbers were to be found fishing in the shallows on any visit to the river.

*Ardea herodias*: Great Blue Heron.

A single blue heron was seen at the boat landing where it had taken refuge behind a rocky headland seeking shelter from a violent windstorm on October 16. It was the only bird of this species observed.

*Leucophoyx thula*: Snowy Egret.

A lone snowy egret was seen fishing in the shallow water near the boat landing on October 17. It had arrived following the violent windstorm and remained until I left.

*Branta canadensis*: Canada Goose.

A small flock of 8 Canada geese was seen flying low down river at sunrise on October 20.

*Anas carolinensis*: Green-winged Teal.

On October 14 during the violent wind, four green-winged teal had taken shelter in the shallow water on the lee side of a rocky headland near the boat landing. The variable surface level of the river and the very



limited areas of shallow water where food might occur offered little attraction for ducks and therefore teal were the only ones seen.

*Cathartes aura*: Turkey Vulture.

Single turkey vultures were seen soaring over the river almost every day between October 10 and October 20. The thermal up-drafts along the river probably offered favorable flying conditions as the prospect of food was nil. These birds usually follow the highways when searching for food in desert regions, as the speeding automobiles kill many birds, mammals and reptiles in passing.

*Buteo jamaicensis*: Red-tailed Hawk.

A lone adult red-tailed hawk hunted regularly along the canyon slope. It was seen very early, just at sunrise on alternate mornings during my 12-day stay. The hawk would fly low along the rim of the canyon, perching on numerous rocky vantage points searching for prey. This prey no doubt was the covey of quail that ranged through the canyon, for the desert chipmunks were never out or active at the early hour the red-tail hunted. However, though I always watched the hawk as it flew from point to point, I never saw it capture prey.

*Aquila chrysaetos*: Golden Eagle.

A single golden eagle was flushed from the roadside one mile east of Willow Beach on October 8. It was feeding on the carcass of a rabbit that had been killed on the highway when disturbed.

*Pandion haliaetus*: Osprey.

A lone fish-hawk was seen perched on the large cable suspended over the river between the perpendicular cliffs at the Black Canyon dam site on October 10.





*Lophortyx gambelii*: Gambel Quail.

Two coveys of very tame, almost domesticated gambel quail were seen daily. One bunch of 30-40 roosted at night in the mesquites in the canyon mouth, north of the campsite canyon, and the largest covey of 100-130 roosted in a mesquite thicket near the river, south of the camping canyon. They ranged over the mountain sides around their roosting spots, but were always to be found at some part of the day in the environs of the campground, their most dependable locality for food. While the two coveys would search for food over the canyon floor, they mixed freely but when leaving, the quail seemed always to divide and assemble in their respective flocks and go their separate ways - the small covey to the north and the larger one to the south. The steep hillside was the lookout point from where they would quickly run down or fly in when a person in the camp threw out food. The actions of the quail when food was placed in a limited area reminded me of barnyard chickens. Pieces of crusts that could be quickly broken up and swallowed rapidly disappeared. The larger pieces caused trouble. Seizing a crust too large to break or swallow, a quail would dart away from the group and attempt to find concealment behind or within a bush on the hillside where it could tear up and eat the food undisturbed. Seldom was this bird successful, for one or more quail that were outside of the closely packed feeders would give spirited chase. Often times the crust would be carried by three or more different quail before the one possessing it found a safe place to stop and devour it. Occasionally, a desert chipmunk, who would seldom venture into the closely feeding quail, would seize a crust from a fleeing quail. In this venture the chipmunk was not always successful either for the





quail were as nimble-footed as the mammal and didn't hesitate to overhaul him and recapture the loot. Indeed, the competitors were extremely interesting to watch.

After the greater part of the food had been consumed, different quail would scratch the softer ground like chickens, first with one foot, then the other. At this time it was not unusual to observe one single bird become belligerent and peck its way into the feeding group. This pugnacious attitude was not always displayed by the same individual for at different times a bird of either sex was seen to force itself in by striking others with its beak. Occasionally a hostile bird would meet another that was likewise in an irascible mood and a jumping rooster fight would follow. Only a few passes would be made, however, for one of the pair would quickly retreat by running away. When out of range, the vanquished would shake its ruffled feathers and resume search for food without displaying further resentment of its recent scuffle.

*Fulica americana*: American Coot.

The narrow river channel with the fairly rapid current had but few secluded spots where slack water conditions permitted water birds to rest or feed. One such place near the boat landing was occupied by a single coot that was observed each time this spot was visited.

*Actitis macularia*: Spotted Sandpiper.

A single spotted sandpiper was observed flying across the river from Nevada to the Arizona side near the Black Canyon dam site on October 12, and an individual, possibly the same bird, was seen near the sheltered boat landing on October 14, a day of strong desert wind.

*Larus californicus*: California Gull.

A lone California gull was seen flying down river near the boat landing



on my last visit to the river October 19. This was the only gull observed during my 12 days spent at this locality, and no doubt was a late south-bound straggler.

*Zenaidura macroura*: Mourning Dove.

A single mourning dove that was seeking shelter from the violent desert wind on October 14 was seen in the camp canyon. It was the only bird of this species observed during my stay.

*Geococcyx californianus*: Roadrunner.

A single predaceous roadrunner lived in the camp canyon and was seen daily skulking over the hillside or about the camps searching for prey. The capture and devouring of no less than five birds and one pocket mouse was witnessed during my stay. There were probably many other small birds captured also during this time for on October 12, six crowned sparrows joined the house sparrow flock in their search for crusts and on October 19 but one remained. Two of these crowned sparrows were observed as victims of the roadrunner. This feeding habit has been well documented (Bent Bull. 176 p. 45) but the canny approach used by this particular roadrunner in pursuit of prey was remarkable. It was ever alert to the rush made for bread crusts by the small flock of house sparrows and would hide behind bushes on the hillside peering through at its prey until closer approach was possible, and then "cat-like" it would, when within range, remain behind a bush or weed - waiting. The successful attack was usually made from a distance of about four feet and from an uphill or overhead starting point; when with a lightning-quick savage lunge into the air with outspread wings, it would single out a sparrow, grabbing a flying bird with its beak. Dropping to the ground the roadrunner would begin beating the





victim on a rock if near one. The killing process used on house sparrows usually required twenty or more hard bangs, either to the left or right depending on the position of the bird in the roadrunner's beak.

After killing the prey, the roadrunner would run a dozen yards where it would stop and tear the prey into pieces small enough to swallow by further beating it on the ground or against a rock. A house sparrow was usually gulped down in three or four pieces.

The procedure used by the roadrunner in pursuit of mammal prey was different. In this, its keen sense of hearing was used. I watched this roadrunner stalking a pocket mouse that was hiding in a small crevice underneath a rock. Apparently the mouse made a slight noise, either rubbing against the rock or squeaking in fear, for the bird stood on top of the rock which was about 10 inches high and 2 feet across, and listened attentively, tipping its head first to one side and then the other. Finally catching the direction from whence the sound was coming, it jumped to the ground and began circling the rock peering at the case. Twice the roadrunner stopped to listen then seeing the prey, it made a quick jab with its beak and came up with a small pocket mouse. Three sharp slaps on the side of the rock killed the victim which was then bolted down in one swallow head first. The mouse's tail hanging out on one side of the roadrunner's beak and disappeared as the body slid down the bird's gullet.

The roadrunner gave chase to anything it could get close to, quail, chipmunk, and all seemed to scamper quickly away. It appeared that the quail were chased because they would run and the roadrunner's intentions did not seem to be more than to heckle, but one chipmunk was chased some distance up the hillside and had to run for its life, and no doubt would



have lost it had not a narrow crevice between two large boulders been reached in the nick of time!

*Bubo virginianus*: Great Horned Owl.

At least one horned owl was heard each night of my stay. During the night of October 16, an overcast sky prevailed and three owls were heard hooting simultaneously in different directions.

*Sphyrapicus varius*: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

A lone sapsucker was seen in the mesquite tree near camp on October 13 and again on the windy days of the 15th and 16th. Numerous sapsucker scars in the bark of the mesquite gave evidence of regular sapsucker visits.

*Sayornis saya*: Say Phoebe.

On October 17 following the three windy days, a pair of Say phoebes came into the campground canyon and made themselves at home catching insects from perches on the trailer tops along camp row.

*Tachycineta thalassina*: Violet-green Swallow  
*Riparia riparia*: Bank Swallow

A single violet-green swallow and several bank swallows were seen flying back and forth searching for insects in a sheltered area out of the violent wind, near the boat landing on October 14 and were the only birds of their species noted during my stay.

*Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*: Rough-winged Swallow  
*Hirundo rustica*: Barn Swallow  
*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*: Cliff Swallow

October 10 marked my first boat ride on the river, and a host of migrating swallows were watched with interest as they coursed to and fro feeding often within a few feet of our faces as we quietly fished from an anchored boat just above the Black Canyon dam site.

Rough-winged and barn swallows were abundant with a few cliff swallows





in their midst; all seemed to be in the same migrating flock, though the local concentration of airborne insects was most likely the cause for this general gathering.

*Cyanocitta stelleri*: Steller Jay.

A lone Steller Jay was seen hopping about camp searching for food before sunrise on October 9 and was the first unusual bird noted. This jay lurked about the camps until the windy day of October 14 when it disappeared and was not observed again until the late afternoon of October 19 when it appeared high on the hillside. At this time it seemed much shyer than when previously seen feeding about camp.

*Aphelcoma coerulescens*: Scrub Jay.

A single scrub jay was first observed on October 11 and many times each day thereafter until it was captured on the 19th. This bird was tame and bold and readily fed with the quail and sparrows on bread crusts thrown out for them by the campers. It often seized a sizable crust from a quail, flying off to a safe place to eat it.

*Corvus corax*: Common Raven.

Two or more ravens were seen about camp each day and a flock of ten came in for a short stay on October 17. They seldom ventured to the floor of the camp canyon, but lingered along the canyon rim perched on the pinnacled rocks where they would sound their weird raucous vocal calls or fly about as though playing; often they would soar in the updrafts with apparent delight.

The camp garbage pit at the far upper end of the canyon was their chief attraction where they foraged for food.

*Thryomanes bewickii*: Bewick Wren.

A single Bewick wren was observed searching for food through the oleanders





early in the morning of windy October 14. Although watched closely for some time, it did not appear to find much to eat in the newly planted hedge.

*Salpinctes obsoletus*: Rock Wren.

Two very tame, though shy, rock wrens were seen daily. They ventured into the camps searching under and around the trailers for insects when the owners were absent.

*Hylocichla guttata*: Hermit Thrush.

A single hermit thrush flew into camp at sunset on October 17 and proved to be the only bird of this species seen during my stay. Observed at very close range, its small size, dark-colored back and brightly colored tail would place it as *H. g. nanus* though such snap identification is always questionable.

*Regulus calendula*: Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

Ruby-crowned kinglets were first observed on October 16, the last day of the windstorm, when four were seen late in the afternoon searching for food in the mesquite near camp.

The next day, October 17, the species was fairly swarming in the mesquite thicket near the river south of the camp canyon. On the 18th, all were gone.

*Bombycilla cedrorum*: Cedar Waxwing.

Four cedar waxwings were seen in the camp mesquite tree on October 10, the day following the rainy night and two were seen in the same tree early in the morning of October 18. As there were no mistletoe berries or other food attractive to these birds, they did not linger long in this arid area.



*Sturnus vulgaris*: Starling.

On October 16 while watching a group of desert quail, chipmunks, and house sparrows scrambling for food ten feet away, in front of a film-exhausted movie camera, I was astonished to have a single starling boldly alight in the center of the feeding horde. The bird came in with a swift and direct flight, no doubt attracted by the birds feeding. After landing it seemed scared and panic-stricken. A slight movement on my part, although I was partly concealed in the oleander hedge, frightened the starling and it was last seen rapidly flying away over the hill crest.

*Vermivora celata*: Orange-crowned Warbler.

Early on the morning of October 12 a single orange-crowned warbler was observed searching for insects in the leaves of the oleander hedge in camp. This was the only bird of this species seen.

*Dendroica auduboni*: Audubon Warbler.

About 9:30 in the evening of October 10, a storm-driven audubon warbler, attracted by the bright light of a gasoline lantern, flew under an awning of a nearby trailer. Birds of this species were seen often during the rest of my stay.

*Dendroica townsendi*: Townsend Warbler.

A storm-driven bright male Townsend warbler alighted in a creosote bush about 20 feet from my observation post while I was making pictures on windy October 16. It was the only bird of this species recorded and did not remain in the area.

*Passer domesticus*: House Sparrow.

A flock of 30-40 audacious house sparrows ranged daily through the camp canyon ever alert for food. They were usually the first to locate a





newly thrown pan of bread crusts and their rush for the food was the signal for the quail and chipmunks to follow. However, they did not compete too sharply with the larger species and were quick to leave if a person moved nearby or towards them.

When feeding, individual sparrows would often seize a good sized crust that could be airborne and fly up onto the hillside to eat. Single birds from this flock were also the occasional prey of the predatory roadrunner who also kept a vigilant watch when bread crusts were thrown out - but not for bread however!

The night roosts of this lot of house sparrows was in rafter niches beneath the eaves of a pump-house and a cement block comfort station. I was never successful in observing any of the sparrows going into their sleeping quarters in the evening but often found them after dark by using a flashlight. When found they would cringe down into a corner but would not flush. The sparrows never left their overnight roosts early, but seemed to await the sunshine to warm up the place before leaving.

*Sturnella neglecta*: Western Meadowlark.

A single meadowlark was found seeking shelter from the violent wind at the mouth of the camp canyon near the river on October 14. It was not observed in the area again.

*Euphagus cyanocephalus*: Brewer Blackbird.

Two Brewer blackbirds were seen at the same time and at the same place the meadowlark was observed - October 14. On my next visit to the boat landing October 16, about a dozen were seen and this little bunch was found foraging along the river's edge on each visit thereafter.



*Molothrus ater*: Brown-headed Cowbird.

Observed but once. On October 10, a flock of about thirty was seen at close range as they flew past, going up the river where we were fishing from an anchored boat just above the Black Canyon dam site.

*Piranga ludoviciana*: Western Tanager.

A western tanager, in winter plumage, sick and barely able to move about, was first seen in camp on October 9 and was observed the next day in the close environs of different camps where it was protected from the roving roadrunner. On the evening of October 11 this bird was brought to me in an almost completely exhausted condition, soaking wet. It had been fished out of a toilet bowl in the ladies' comfort station.

*Zonotrichia leucophrys*: White-crowned Sparrow.

The first white-crowned sparrow was seen on the morning of October 11, and the following day five more were about. All had joined the house sparrows in their forays for bread crusts. It was interesting to watch and compare the actions of the two species when they were feeding together. The house sparrows would fly away with larger pieces of food while the white-crowns would endeavor to carry their larger chunks in under the nearest low weeds or shrubs where they could eat in safety. When crusts were broken into crumbs and trampled into the loose soil the house sparrows would peck and flip the soil about with their beaks almost thrasher-like to expose the food while the white-crowns would scratch with both feet together using a forward-backward thrust several times then stopping to pick up crumbs. They appeared to want to dig even though crumbs were visible on the surface.





The house sparrows were a bold though timorous lot and would fly en masse at the least out of the ordinary noise or movement within their sight or hearing, while the white-crowns were more placid and always last to leave. This lag left them open to roadrunner attack and the six white-crowns began to disappear one by one. I witnessed the capture of two. On October 19, the last day I had to watch birds at Willow Beach, but a single white-crown was left feeding with the house sparrows though there were others about in the mesquites near the river. San Diego Society of Natural History, Balboa Park, San Diego, California. January 23, 1961.

